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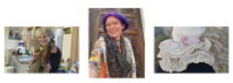

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Crafting Disability: Re-envisioning Indian Textile Traditions

Amanda Cachia

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Abstract

This article examines the work of two contemporary feminist disabled artists who are originally from India, and who currently live and work in the United States. Bhavna Mehta and Sugandha Gupta both work in textiles, and identify as women with disabilities. Mehta embroiders X-rays of her own body that capture her medical condition as someone with polio and who uses a wheelchair, where she uses embroidery skills passed down to her by female family members in India. Mehta rescripts the medical narratives of her condition so that her disability is accorded a literal and metaphorical personal touch, antithetical to the often-dehumanizing imagery that pervades within the medical industrial complex. Gupta, who was born with albinism, which also impacted her vision at birth, uses felt and other materials inspired by craft research in India to create sensorial fabrics that disrupt the hierarchy of the senses, with an emphasis on the generative tactile properties of objects. By analyzing the work of these two artists, I not only aim to introduce underrepresented feminist art histories, expanding the literature of the Global South, but I also wish to offer an argument that these artists are

crafting new feminist forms of disability and re-envisioning Indian textile traditions.

Keywords: feminist disability art, crafting disability, disability textiles, art from the Global South, Indian disability art

Introduction

This article examines the work of two contemporary feminist disabled artists who are originally from India, and who currently live and work in the United States. Bhavna Mehta and Sugandha Gupta both work in textiles, and identify as women with disabilities. Mehta embroiders X-rays of her own body that capture her medical condition as someone with polio and who uses a wheelchair, where she uses embroidery skills passed down to her by female family members in India. Mehta rescripts the medical narratives of her condition so that her disability is accorded a literal and metaphorical personal touch, antithetical to the often-dehumanizing imagery that pervades within the medical industrial complex. Gupta, who was born with albinism, which also impacted her vision at birth, uses felt and other materials inspired by craft research in India to create sensorial fabrics that disrupt the hierarchy of the senses, with an emphasis on the generative tactile properties of objects. By analyzing the work of these two artists, I not only aim to introduce underrepresented feminist art histories, expanding the literature of the Global South, but I also wish to offer an argument that these artists are crafting new feminist forms of disability and re-envisioning Indian textile traditions.

Art history has spent little time considering a revisionist account through disability, and especially a Black and Brown disability framework. I aim to consider how a feminist art history is pushed further by a discourse on disability through the work of these two Indian artists. Here, I would like to acknowledge the importance of the scholarship on the politics of craft by art historians such as Glenn Adamson and Julia Bryan-Wilson, who have explored these topics in depth, including "craftivism," and debates around craft praxis as it relates to materiality, gender, sexuality, and race.[1] In my project, I aim to further the literature by inserting the feminist disabled voice. While scholars such as Adamson and Bryan-Wilson have specifically considered the politics of craft through a feminist and queer art dialogue, I aim to build on their contributions by inserting disability into this rhetoric, too. In the final section of this essay, I deploy Leigh Gruwell's thinking around craft agency, new materialist rhetorics and the mattering of making, and connect this to Mehta and Gupta's work.[2]

This article builds on several other papers I wrote in the past few years: the first is entitled "Art History's Co-Inhabitants: Disabled Artistic Approaches to Indigeneity," where I looked at how the work of Oceanic New Zealand-based artist Pelenakeke Brown and neuro-diverse Lenape Canadian-based artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher drew on their Indigenous female ancestry and forms of knowing to create a new visual language.[3] In that chapter, I posited that Brown and Dion's various physical disabilities and neuro-divergence offered a critical activist methodology in which to frame the production of their work. In the second essay, "Reinvention at the Wheel: Shaping New Histories in the Decolonization of Disability," I examined the work of Black disabled artist Shawanda Corbett, who draws on the construct of the

cyborg and its theoretical feminist applications through scholars such as Donna Haraway as part of an effort to illustrate how disability can be decolonized.[4] In the present article, I also gesture that the art praxis by Gupta and Mehta weaves together complex intersectional identities and Indian heritage with the methodology of the lived experience of disability to generate a visual language around atypical, gendered embodiment. In linking this essay with the earlier essays I have published, I am indicating to the reader how I am growing this body of scholarship as part of a larger project of integrating a more intersectional approach to disability that I remain invested in.

Shifting Geo-Political Conditions of Craft: How Disability Adds a New Imprint

There are many younger generation contemporary disabled artists, apart from Bhavna Mehta and Sugandha Gupta, who are turning to craft as a powerful source for nurturing and connecting with the body. For example, for Francisco echo Eraso, based in New York City, craft is a source of both comfort and politics, and he is especially interested in cooperative textiles and the redistribution of resources. He uses gold in his weavings produced on a loom as a way to comment on the histories of mining, capitalist accumulation, decadence, indigenous language and healing practices. Raisa Kabir is based in London and known for her work in weaving, sound, performance, video, textiles and woven text "to materialize concepts concerning the cultural politics of cloth, labor and embodied geographies. Using a language of weaving resistance, she comments on power, production, and the disabled brown queer body as an archive of collective trauma."[5] Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, who is based in Chicago, has long made disability couture as a way to empower and literally re-fashion her body using customized garments made for her atypical hands, feet and other body parts. Re-birth Garments, led by disabled designer Sky Cubacub, also based in Chicago, makes gender non-conforming wearables and accessories for people on the full spectrum of gender, size, and ability.

While all this praxis is critical work that simultaneously intervenes in and contributes to a history of textile politics and feminist production, I acknowledge how histories from the Global South are also being woven into these revised traditions, especially given Mehta and Gupta's backgrounds. Both Mehta and Gupta are from a diaspora in which a culture of disability politics is still repressed, and instead, the economy and politics of textile labor comes with other forms of radical activism that must be accounted for. In the introduction to her book, *The Necessity of Craft*, editor Lorna Kaino offers insights into the perspectives of women's craft production in the Asia-Pacific region.[6] Within this part of the Global South, craft production is a matter of survival, so craft is a commodity that does not come with a luxury of being seen in an art gallery. While women are the makers of these craft objects, often they have to ironically rely on men to sell them. So, on the one hand, while women have a direct and important role in the production of the means of survival for a community, on the other hand they are cut off from being able to represent themselves and their literal craft in an exchange of goods for currency. Within this problematic, disability doesn't even enter the conversation, as it is rather an issue of feminist politics and survival. For the women who

are the relatives of Mehta and Gupta, a reliance on their embroidering, weaving and sewing skills is not necessarily a matter of survival. However, I argue that the women and their relationship to textiles emerges from an epistemological place that more likely sits between the notion of craft as necessity, and craft as women's work (and therefore solely belonging in the domestic sphere). Mehta and Gupta both grew up making crafts alongside their female relatives. They come to this work knowing and understanding these politics attached to craft and their place as women within it, both on micro and macro levels. And yet, both Gupta and Mehta also had to contend with their bodies and identities as disabled women, while growing up and, eventually, when they immigrated to the United States.

In this essay I suggest that the politics of disability adds another generative layer to the already textured and dense histories and politics of craft. The stories of disability that Gupta and Mehta have to weave into the medium allows for empowering qualities to grow and thrive. The role disability craft has to play in representing minority subjects becomes critical, both inside and outside the museum. In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate how Gupta and Mehta began to endow their craft-based practices with these additional layers of meaning, which brings to life their unique intersectional stories and identities as disabled Indian women.

Bhavna Mehta's Journey through Embroidery

Mehta's family was not traditionally in the business of craft education and making, but worked as business people selling food items such as groceries, spices and grains. They did not sell any of the embroideries they did make. In Mehta's generation, the women had to go to school and learn English, a language that was different from their mother tongue, because English was becoming a language of commerce, trade, law, and medicine. English was going to be the language of the future when Mehta was growing up in the 1970s in India. So, instead of selling things that were being made, people used education as a way to enter an economy that was changing because India had a young democracy. India's Constitution emerged in 1950, and Mehta was born 17 years later. Crafts were something that one did at home with the family. Although rural families were still doing crafts and keeping the family skills alive, many other families in cities started to move towards more academic and professional careers.

Mehta learned her skills in embroidery with her female relatives mostly during the summer break, which was several months long. It was so hot that one couldn't really go out. Heat was a major problem, and there was no air conditioning. Mehta said that her family would drape cool fabrics over the windows and then a cool breeze would come in. The first process of the embroidery would be to actually transfer a design onto the fabric using carbon paper from a design that would exist on a tracing paper. Once the transfer happened, colors would be selected, along with hoops, needles and threads, and somebody would start the embroidery. If the stitch was something new that everyone was learning for the first time, they would have a little scrap to practice the stitch on. The embroideries were not very big. There might have been three or four pieces, and people would work on their hoop for a while and then it could be exchanged with somebody else. Mehta says that it was a way to be

together more than actually the embroidering itself.

For a long time, Mehta regarded the Indian embroidery she learned from her family as traditional, and she was unable to translate those traditional forms and the designs and patterns into something that she could make contemporary and relate back to her own ideas. But then she started looking at other artists' works and how they would develop repetitions which could be transformed into something different than what she had been exposed to in her childhood. When Mehta realized that she could develop her own language with embroidery, she realized that the stitches of her past could be depicted anew, which she found very exciting. She realized that embroidery could really reflect some of the things she wanted to talk about.

Mehta also said that she discovered that to the Greeks and the Romans, the word India meant cotton, including textiles, threads, embroidery. Textiles from India were fine and rich, and included cotton, silk, and wool, and all of them were important to India's history. Mehta states that she can also feel her mother's presence and her hand when she is embroidering: "It's a deep connection to my mother. It's a deep connection to India's ancient history."[7]

With the profound historical and personal connections to embroidery that Mehta carried with her, she realized that she could say something further about her experiences as a disabled woman, which had little place for discussion during her childhood. Mehta was the only visibly disabled person in her family and in her school. She used crutches and braces to walk in India. While she was not able to use her wheelchair anywhere outside the house, she was fortunate enough to have a wheelchair in the first place: "that was one difference between me and other people who were disabled in India."[8] Mehta experienced a lot of isolation as a young person owing to her disability, and would only ever meet others who were disabled when she was in hospital. The medical model of disability, developed by disability scholars and which offers a framework for how disability is perceived in society, is how Mehta felt the world would relate to her as a disabled woman in India. The medical model of disability posits that disability is a defect within the individual and needs to be fixed. She states, "the idea of the social model of disability would have never entered our minds."[9] The social model argues that, in reverse to the medical model, the limitations of the individual are not the cause of disability at all, but rather it is society that has failed to provide necessary accommodations within the environment. Even the idea of talking about disability was shunned in India, as the notion of drawing more attention to yourself (even more than the attention one would already receive by virtue of being physically disabled) was considered taboo. Mehta said that these ideas were further reinforced and complicated by the fact that the culture in India meant that women were not expected to talk about their bodies at all, let alone a disabled body.

Embroidery could offer Mehta a canvas from which to speak and express herself, given she was unable to speak of her disability in the past. Mehta felt that the aspect of her identity that had to do with disability often got hidden away and forgotten, but her embroidery allows this part of her identity to be revealed. When Mehta left India for the USA, she stuffed medical X-rays of her chest, ribs, and spine into a suitcase, only to find them again decades later. The X-rays were

taken when she was a teenager, and showed scoliosis in her spine, which was caused by the polio virus that disabled her at the age of seven. She looked at her X-rays as she never had before; now she looked at them through the eyes of an artist. She compares finding them to finding her body "buried beneath layers of silence. Just like an X-ray reveals the unseen architecture of a body, a story can unearth the shifting language of our experiences."[10] Mehta wanted to focus on how she could connect her body of the past and present with nature, which is often inaccessible to her as a disabled woman. She wanted to find nature within her own body instead. She used the black and white X-ray as her canvas and embroidered a colorful silk landscape of rivers, plants, mountains and valleys in the middle of her chest to create her piece *I Found a River in My Body* (2022) (Figure 1). The canvas is a rectangular silk fabric piece with a printed X-ray of chest, ribs, and curved spine in black and white. Two metal rods can be seen in the center of the print; they are attached to the spinal vertebrae. The embroidery on the X-ray is done with silk thread and a variety of colors are shown. The embroidery is found on the left side of the canvas, on the bottom left ribs of the X-ray. The embroidery makes up a topographic map using corresponding colors to those commonly used on maps to show features such as plants, mountains, valleys, deserts, and rivers. There are many depicted rivers running along in the circle, but the main river runs aligned with the two rods shown in the X-ray. There are a few threads which barely leave the primary circle of the map, representing features such as rivers and deserts spreading to different parts of the body. By combining the body (the X-ray) and the topographic map (representing the land and the environment) the artist offers the viewer a thought-provoking question: "How does the discovery of a disabled body relate to the discovery of land and what value does that affect have?"[11]

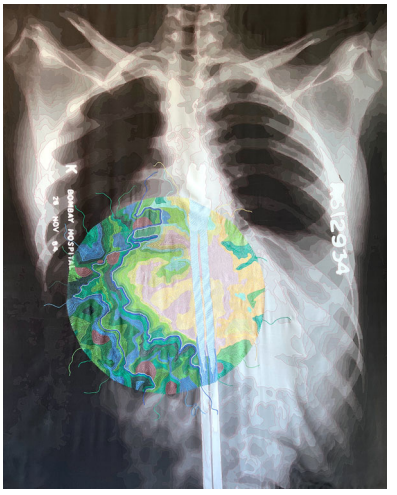

Fig 1 Bhavna Mehta, *I Found a River in My Body #1*, 2022. Hand embroidery on printed silk, 60 × 51 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Through this artwork, Mehta rescripts the perception that disability is unnatural. Being able to use her old X-rays to make the prints on fabric and then embroidering into these has given the artist a way not just to look inside the body and gain clarity about what the architecture of the body is, but also to consider how the body has tenderness, where the fabric is like skin and can absorb different kinds of marks, both intended and unintended. While Mehta acknowledges the political discourse on how embroidery is feminist and domestic and associated with women's work, she also finds a connection with the notion of how embroidery is tied to the flesh. Like flesh, embroidery has the ability to take the shape of something, both literally and metaphorically. Mehta asks, "what is the story we can tell

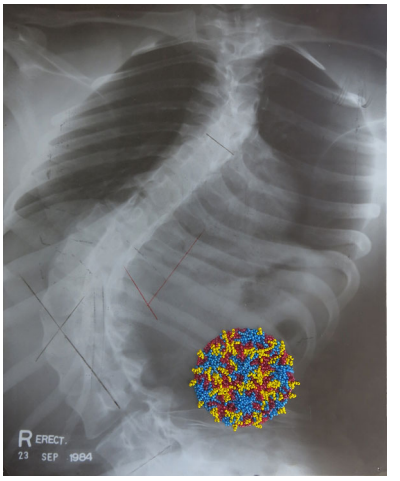

Fig 2 Bhavna Mehta, *Throughlines: Polio Virus #1*, 2019. Glass Beads embroidered on X-Ray, 16 × 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig 3 Bhavna Mehta, *Throughlines: Polio Virus #4*, 2020. Glass Beads embroidered on X-Ray, 16 × 13 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

through the colors and designs of embroidery?"[12] In answering her own question, Mehta would come back to her Indian notion of embroidery as a kind of abundance: you might have a plain piece of fabric and then suddenly there are marks and there's an abundance of form. The X-ray literally makes transparent the fact that the body has many different things happening inside, and by embroidering over the top of the X-ray and into the fabric-as-skin, Mehta adds to the layers of flesh and the layers of meaning.

Mehta has made other related work also using her own X-rays. In her piece *Throughlines: Poliovirus #1* (Figure 2), she illustrates a single virus by embroidering colorful beads directly on her X-rays. She interprets a single virus as the beginning of a story. *Throughlines: Poliovirus #4* (Figure 3) depicts the progression of the virus multiplication process, which she describes as an attack on her neurons, affecting muscle function.

In an interview with Mehta, I asked her what her family in India thinks of her artwork, particularly regarding how she has reconstituted her embroidery into new forms through the X-rays of her disabled body. She said it was hard for them to understand it, not least because for them, embroidery is not art, but simply embroidery, which recalls Kaino's observations discussed at the beginning of this essay. While there are clearly major cultural differences between Mehta's native country and her acquired country of residence, the artist has successfully woven together a story of her identity that combines old traditions from the fabric of India's history with layers of feminist politics alongside newer notions of disabled embodiment. This makes for a unique and textured contribution to a disabled approach to craft.

Sugandha Gupta's Journey through Felt, Wool and Silk

Sugandha Gupta was born legally blind and with albinism, which affects her vision in

Fig 4 Sugandha Gupta, *Sight of Touch*, 2017. Merino Wool, Silk, Cotton, Cashmere wool, alpaca fibers, felting, sewing. Courtesy of the artist.

many different ways. For example, how she sees the world from minute to minute depends on the light conditions, glare, and brightness in the atmosphere. Gupta also doesn't have depth perception or peripheral vision, and she has nystagmus which further makes it hard for her eyes to focus. However, because the artist does see something, her unsighted experience is constantly questioned and misunderstood. Gupta's tactile works using felt, wool, and silk challenge preconceived notions of seeing the world through our vision only and instead focus on the ability to feel the world through our other senses (Figure 4).

Gupta has always loved arts and crafts but never felt confident in her capabilities due to the stigma around a blind person, or someone with low vision, making or contributing to a visually dominated art and design world. There was a lot of stigma attached to not only Gupta's visibly disabled body as a woman with albinism, but also her lack of skill because every woman in India was expected to be skilled at craft in some form or other. Thus, her unattachment to craft was problematic. Most older women in India know crochet embroidery, knitting, or basic sewing. Gupta's grandmother was a crocheter and a knitter, and her maternal grandmother also used to sew clothes. When Gupta was a baby, her mother used to sew clothes and crochet items. Despite being deeply drawn to art, the artist didn't have any confidence or guidance until she was in high school. At that time, she was noticed by her art teacher, who saw that she had dedication and determination and encouraged her to pursue her passion. Then, when she attended the National Institute of Design, one of her professors planted the idea to create her own alternative ways of creating access. Initially there was a lot of apprehension towards Gupta at the school, because there was a misconception swirling around regarding how she was going to navigate the world of

textiles as a blind person. Eventually she was able to play with and explore textiles without intimidation. For Gupta, textiles gave her choice, given the breadth of materials and textures.

Similar to Mehta, Gupta speaks of how textiles are associated with women's identity in India, particularly through the sari. India has a large cottage industry in which textiles are produced within domestic spaces. As mentioned, women in India are generally expected to perform household work such as cooking, cleaning, and mending. Textile work fits within that context. In some social circles, Gupta talks of how the women she meets all claim to have skills in certain areas of textiles, and this was a common practice. The culture is extremely family oriented and textiles are a part of every household. Even at a minimum level, women are expected to do some work for their husband's clothing. Gupta said that her grandmother was very resourceful, and that she would make crafts out of waste scraps from what was left over from her previous projects. The textile program in Gupta's college was also very heavy on studying, acknowledging and respecting the tradition. Textiles is a realm which is familiar to Gupta through her immediate and extended family, but also through Indian culture at large. Gupta believes that she is likely subconsciously drawn to textiles for this reason.

Women in India are far from victims today. While it is true that the feminist movement in India made disabled women invisible at first, now there is a growing corpus of critical feminist disability studies writing that is bringing disabled women's concerns to the fore.[13] Despite this, Gupta says she has always been considered an outsider because she doesn't look like a brown-skinned Indian owing to her white skin as an outcome of albinism. Gupta says even though she looks white on the outside, she is brown on the inside, because she was raised as a brown person, who eats food that brown people eat, and who speaks the brown language. When Gupta decided to immigrate to the United States, she found her identity as an Indian woman slipping away even further, as she was no longer surrounded by Indian culture on a daily basis. As a way to stay connected to her heritage, Gupta found textiles could capture a cultural aspect of her identity and her childhood.

One of the things that Gupta has to contend with in terms of her social identity as a disabled woman of color in the United States is the fear of being misinterpreted. Because she appears white and not brown, and because she is a fluent English speaker, people forget that she was not born and raised in the USA and that she is indeed brown. There is an expectation that Gupta must know the ways of elite academia and even Western cultural norms, and she often finds herself being susceptible to cultural and social misunderstanding by others. Coupled with this is the added pressure of being an immigrant, which makes it challenging for Gupta to vocalize or even express herself freely, so making her textiles has become a source of great solace for the artist. Beyond simply solace, Gupta has stated that working with textiles has been a survival skill for her, and a trade, and something she completely relies on for a living. Gupta's know-how of textiles and her skillful completion and creation of it is very important to her.

When Gupta started making her tactile work, she was very hesitant to incorporate the disability angle because of the stigma attached to disability. Disabled women also,

through the socialization process, internalize ableist and patriarchal ways of perceiving their own bodies and identities. The hegemony of that internal oppression remains pervasive until the time they consciously choose to engage with it. Gupta used to dye her white hair dark for almost a decade before immigrating to the US as a way of trying to make herself look more Indian and to fit in. When Gupta turned to craft to express herself and her identity as a disabled woman, she also came to the profound realization that she had to embrace her own identity and her natural look as a person with albinism. She slowly started removing the black dye from her hair so that her hair would go back to its original white color, as Gupta realized that she wanted her work to shed light on albinism itself, which is still considered a taboo topic in India. Rather than having to vocalize these thoughts and ideas, Gupta felt that it was her own natural appearance and her work that could speak on her behalf. As Gupta began to develop her textile practice, relying on the sense of touch to act as a political statement but also one that the artist could manipulate to show her range of remarkable skills with the medium, she also realized that she needed to push the medium even further. As she began conducting research on disabled artists and learning about disability culture in the United States, Gupta wanted to make her work even more accessible to a wider audience, which is why she also now includes other sensorial elements in her textiles, including scent, sound, and vision.

One of the other major paradigms that Gupta's practice revolves around is embracing the affinity that the colors of natural fibers share with the hair colors and skin tones of people within the albinism community. Gupta made the decision to use only natural fibers in her work as a way of staying connected to albinism. As well as using natural dyes to make a political statement, Gupta also notes the positive benefits that come from avoiding colored dyes in her work, just as she now avoids it in her own hair, which means her studio remains clean, toxin-free, and chemical-free. This is particularly meaningful given Gupta's commitment towards environmental justice. Some of the natural-colored threads and fibers that that the artist has used include golds, browns, and even blacks. Every natural fiber has a different feel which allows the work to take on unique tactile characteristics, similar to the embodiment of albinism itself. Gupta first encountered many others with albinism when she attended a conference for people with albinism in the United States. She remarked that she was amazed to see a large community of pigmented people, and her attendance at this event solidified her commitment of making color obsolete in her artwork. Instead, Gupta said, "I really felt even more committed to the idea of not using color, but showcasing all the different color tones and hues within the albinism community … "[14] Gupta acknowledged that within the albinism community, the hues and pigments of peoples' skins can vary to the point that some feel isolated even amongst their own kind. She feels that her artwork embraces all these colors and variations, and seeing color—and the taboo of color—animated so beautifully and multi-sensorially in Gupta's work can bring a fresh layer of appreciation of skin and its complex metaphorical and literal layers.

Daily Practice is a 60-day daily study of the experiences observed by Gupta (Figure 5), resembling the form of a diary. For this textile work, Gupta created the base of the

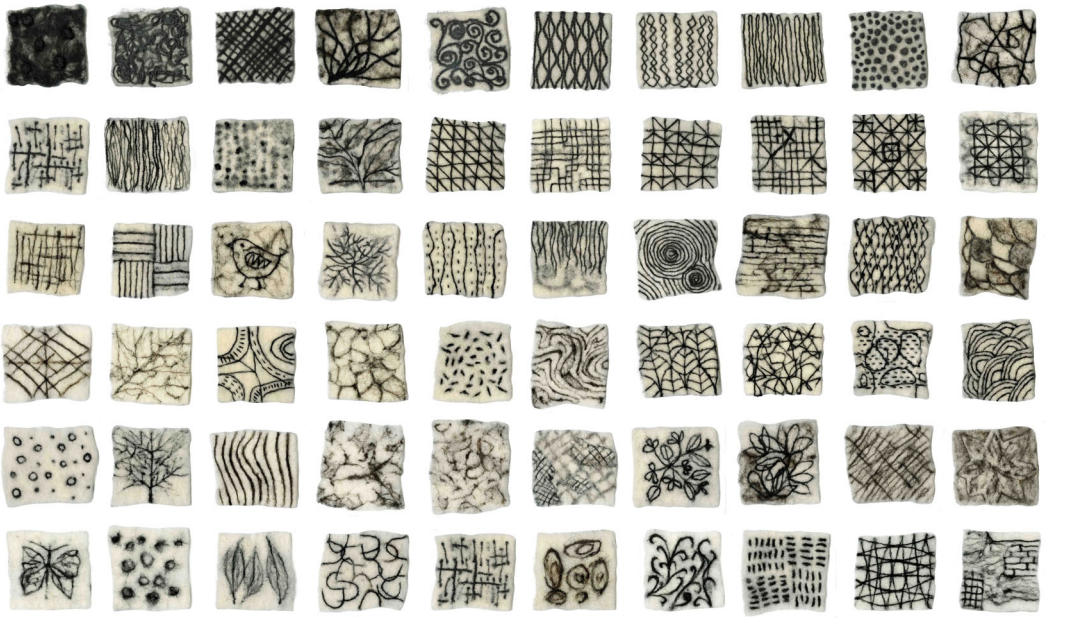

Fig 5 Sugandha Gupta, *Daily Practice*, 2017. Merino Wool, Needle felting, Wet Felting. Courtesy of the artist.

felted fabric using Merino wool fibers and then produced the designs on it by utilizing a felting needle to condense and entangle the black material into the white felted base. On some days, she would use much less black material for each pattern or design she created. On other days she would incorporate more black thread into the squares than others. Each square reflects a pattern or motif that the artist may have seen or noticed on her walks or time spent in nature. The squares are not perfectly straight and angular due to the process of needle felting which makes them shrink unevenly. Some of the patterns are more geometric and inspired by grills, fences and organic shapes such as leaves, branches, and birds. With this technique, Gupta creates her own unique pattern of detail and depth for each of the 60 days. Using the contrast of black and white, along with particular designs, she shows us how different each day can be. While sharing her daily life experience in each square, we can also reflect on how unique our own everyday experiences could be as well. Gupta's work draws on a long history of artists who journal and consequently display the contents as an art object for consumption. What is distinctive about Gupta's journaling is how we are given a lens into Gupta's world through textures, patterns, and sensations, rather than through conventional passages of text or images. Thus, not only are audiences offered an opportunity to reflect on and connect with Gupta's everyday experiences through the familiar medium of a journal, but she is allowing us an opportunity to sense the diary differently from the artist's own unique perspective. This allows us to consider the everyday from a completely new angle and framework.

Fig 6 Sugandha Gupta, *Tussah Silk* pleated wearable, 2021. Tussuh silk hand pleated and sewn. Courtesy of the artist.

In *Tactile Scarves*, Gupta focuses on stimulating the senses – like touch and smell – to give the audience a multi-sensorial experience (Figure 6). She purposefully chose silk, a high-quality fiber, for a smooth and comfortable feel in any season. Silk has temperature regulating properties, keeping cool in hot months and warm during colder months. Gupta also infused a lemongrass scent into her scarf for a soothing smell. She wanted to produce tactility with more sensory information, allowing people to experience and interpret her artwork using more than one sense. *Tactile Scarves* is her way of showcasing her strengths in the other senses. They are her love letters to herself, acknowledging that different perspectives in viewing the world are crucial to a new understanding of the unique contributions all our senses make to experiencing the world around us. The scarves are typically displayed on mannequin busts that sit atop a pedestal in the gallery, although Gupta encourages visitors to drape the scarves around their own necks to experience the scent and tactile sensations that the artist has created. Given the unusual level of tactile engagement that this work invites within the gallery environment, visitors are simultaneously reminded of how limited their experiences can be when solely relying on visual or audio elements in encountering a work of art. Within the full sensorial experience that the scarves offer, we learn that there is still so much more to learn—and to gain—when we visit the art gallery. Gupta's work then breaks down ocular-centric modes of display.

Gupta is currently collaborating with black disabled dancer, Jerron Herman, where the performer will drape his body in textile creations by Gupta for a custom choreography that aims to build upon the sensory experience of dance. Herman has been commissioned to perform in Gupta's garments in an upcoming event, and Gupta is excited about this collaboration as the pair investigate how Herman's movement can coalesce generatively with tactility, vision, and sound. Through this project, and all of Gupta's praxis, she is contributing a unique touch to the haptic activism movement within the disability justice community, theorized and practiced by numerous other artists and scholars including Fayen d'Evie, Wendy Jacob, Andy Slater, Georgina Kleege, Fiona Candlin, and Constance Classen, to name a few.[15] As

mentioned, Gupta's work also presents a rich challenge for curators, as her textiles are meant for engagement within displays. Given that touching is typically forbidden in the museum, Gupta's work then also carries agentive qualities that aim to encourage more open and beneficial learning experiences for the visitor, where the hierarchy of the senses can be broken down and rearranged.

Craft Agency: The Materiality of Relationality

In *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics* (2022), Leigh Gruwell begins her discussion by talking about the historical figure Ada Lovelace, a woman who is known as the "mother of computer programing."[16] Lovelace had discovered a mathematical breakthrough that sparked calculations on an analytical engine machine far more advanced than had ever been discovered previously. Gruwell informs us that a key aspect of Lovelace's discovery (of which few people are aware) is that the Jacquard loom, which stores data for creating patterns in weaving, is what in fact inspired Lovelace in her calculations. Gruwell writes that Lovelace faced many obstacles in her career, as she was also juggling motherhood and the barriers she experienced as a woman. Gruwell also notes that Lovelace experienced poor health and asthma attacks, and used a crutch for walking. She states: "Navigating the world through her ill, female body and the expectations that followed it, Lovelace faced the intersection of power and materiality every day."[17] In her recounting of Lovelace's story, Gruwell not only establishes the connection between weaving and the birth of digital technology (proving that materiality intersects with the digital), but also shows that the foundation of how these worlds fused together was ultimately owing to a person who had an intersectional identity as a disabled woman, and who understood power imbalances intimately, as Gupta and Mehta do. Lovelace paved the way for creating a more equitable future for disabled women.

Gruwell's work also offers a philosophical framework in new materialist rhetorics that is useful for this essay, because she points out how the entanglements of actors and relationality itself are in essence the true engine of what produces work at the loom or the programs through a keyboard. She says, "new materialist rhetorics … productively orient the field toward an understanding of agency as distributed among assemblages of human and nonhuman actors … "[18] Craft is a medium which provides evidence of how materiality is very much entwined with power and politics, and we must recognize the ethical implications within it. Craft is produced by many hands within a class system. Its actors have different levels of power within a community, and the ways in which the fabric is woven and unwoven can directly impact the assembling and disassembling of those same power relations. Craft then has the capacity to carry agency, otherwise called "craft agency," owing to its mutable and pliable qualities. Gruwell goes on to argue that through craft agency, we can observe how power circulates and even stagnates, and craft can even provide tools to challenge "uneven distribution."[19] Mehta and Gupta demonstrate craft agency through their art practices based on their identities as brown disabled women from the Global South, and show how models of relationality between human and nonhuman things can help to enact change.

As Gruwell emphasizes, the materiality of relationality itself is the glue, so to speak, that makes textile work the communal activity it is. Its communal character is acknowledged and felt deeply by both Mehta and Gupta. The familial entanglements bound in textile-making in cultures and countries around the world are also connected to contemporary thinking around disability justice. Western concepts of the politics of care and dependency focus on how access is formed through social relationships. This connection is also important because within the field of disability studies, numerous theorizations around concepts of care have been generated by feminist activist scholars, particularly Eva Feder Kittay, whose ground-breaking work around the "ethics of care" shows how care-work is often cast as "feminine."[20] These philosophical frameworks coalesce around the work that Mehta and Gupta are offering us, so we can envision a different future that allows for alternative embodiments not only to shape our fabrics, X-rays, and scarves, but also to ensure these same fabrics, in turn, reshape the world.

Bhavna Mehta and Sugandha Gupta are contributing to a growing and evolving disability arts and craft praxis that adds a rich and generative layer to the genre of craft. There is still so little scholarship dedicated to the work of contemporary disabled artists, and even less to the work of disabled artists who come from the Global South. Mehta and Gupta are leaders for showcasing how craft traditions from India can be woven into the fabric of disability studies discourse in the United States, and how that discourse is molded and shaped by cultural and sociological forces that diverge from Western influences. While feminism and disability studies have not yet been taken up with great momentum within Indian society, Mehta and Gupta nevertheless show how the dynamics of intersectional identity can be unraveled, recontextualized and retold, using ancient and revered textile traditions. The artists also bring a rich constellation of other nodes of politics and metaphors to their work, including the connection between flesh, skin, and material form, the relationships between interior and exterior environments, the tension between natural and unnatural within color and chemicals, and how tactility is a zone for challenging the hierarchy of the senses. Mehta and Gupta's stories from their childhoods and how their work is perceived by audiences across the United States and back home in India also remind us that the medium of textiles is still contested ground in terms of how it is framed and treated philosophically, epistemologically, and methodologically around the world. By parsing out these stories and traditions carefully, we have much to learn.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1 For more information, see Glenn Adamson's books, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), *The Craft Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), and *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Glenn Adamson and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art in the Making: Artists and their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2016); and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

2 Leigh Gruwell, *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2022). See also Elizabeth Guffey and Bess Williamson, eds., *Making Disability Modern: Design Histories* (London: Bloomsbury

Publishing, 2020); Elizabeth Guffey, *Designing Disability: Symbols, Space, and Society* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); and a review of *Indisposable: Tactics for Care and Mourning* held at the Ford Foundation Gallery New York City from October 1 to December 10, 2022, by Elizabeth Guffey for the *Journal of Modern Craft*, 16, nos. 2–3 (July–November 2023): 201–205.

3 Amanda Cachia, "Art History's Co-Inhabitants: Disabled Artistic Approaches to Indigeneity," in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Disability*, ed. Keri Watson and Timothy Hiles (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 134–146.

4 Amanda Cachia, "Reinvention at the Wheel: Shaping New Histories in the Decolonization of Disability," in *The Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art History*, ed. Tatiana Flores, Florencia San Martín and Charlene Villaseñor Black (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), 73–83.

5 Raisa Kabir biography from her website, https://lids-sewn-shut.typepad.com/blog/about.html (accessed May 14, 2024).

6 Lorna Kaino, *The Necessity of Craft: Development and Women's Craft Practices in the Asian-Pacific Region* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1995).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 See Kim Q. Hall, ed., *Feminist Disability Studies* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011) and many articles by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, including "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" in *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3, special issue on Feminist Disability Studies (Autumn 2002): 1–32.

14 Lorna Kaino, *The Necessity of Craft: Development and Women's Craft Practices in the Asian-Pacific Region* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1995).

15 See Fiona Candlin, *Art, Museums, and Touch* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, Rethinking Art's Histories series, 2010); Fiona Candlin, "Rehabilitating Unauthorised Touch, *or* Why Museum Visitors Touch the Exhibits," *Senses and Society* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 251–266; Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999); Georgina Kleege, *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Georgina Kleege, "The Art of Touch: Lending a Hand to the Sighted Majority," in *Journal of Visual Culture* 20, no. 2 (2021): 433–451.

16 Gruwell, *Making Matters*, 3.

17 Ibid., 5.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 7.

20 Eva Feder Kittay, "The Ethics of Care, Dependency, and Disability," *Ratio Juris* 24, no. 1 (Feb. 2011): 49–58.